

Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange

Volume 2018

Issue 1 *The Shoebox Issue*

Article 15

June 2019

An Ode to Cuerici

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Recommended Citation

Cotnoir, Alexander (2019) "An Ode to Cuerici," *Alterity: The Dartmouth Journal of Intercultural Exchange*: Vol. 2018 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.dartmouth.edu/alterity/vol2018/iss1/15>

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An Ode to Cuerici

By: Alexander Cotnoir

Dearest Cuerici,

Do you remember when I first arrived, in the beginning of the Costa Rican dry season after traversing the swerving spine of the Talamanca Mountains? I had stepped off of the bus with sleepy legs, for I had sat for the better part of a day observing the montane cloud forests as they whizzed past. It is amazing Cuerici, to think that you sit in content isolation above the clouds; above the chaotic city life of San Jose just on the other side of the mountain highway. We had left Costa Rica's largest city early in the morning as the golden Central American sun began to rise and cast its warm rays down upon the Central Valley. I peered out the window as we climbed upward. The last of the telephone poles were quickly swallowed by the jaws of the jungle, as moss-covered trees rose along the side of the road. The road slithered its way up the curvy contours of the first peak, like a black snake weaving between rocks. The scene instilled a sense of awe among the passengers as a rusted guardrail stood as the only barrier between our bus and a thousand-foot vertical drop. As I gazed at the green and misty landscape amid the boat-like rock of the bus, I began imagining the perilous work that had been undertaken, by hand and by mule, to blast and chisel the way for this route. Although many people had died plummeting from the edges of the Talamanca Highway, countless more lives, both human and horse, had been lost long before the road's construction. According to my "Costa Rican History" brochure, this was due to the rainy, windy, and cold conditions travelers faced during long journeys to and from villages across the ridges of these mountains. It was of no surprise to me then Cuerici, when I learned that the road to your elevated home is named "Cerro de la Muerte", or "Summit of Death". I wonder if this name was an act of fate, because you were one of the most beautiful, inviting places I've ever visited. Perhaps you should thank Cerro de la Muerte for keeping your well-kept secret.

Approximately half-way through the drive to greet you, we entered the thick-as-molasses cloud layer that often frequents your home in the mornings and evenings. Here however, at the highest pass in Central America, the cloud layer is a constant presence. The air was so thick with water droplets that it streamed down the bus windows as though we were descending in a plane through a thunderstorm. When I awoke from a dream-filled nap a few hours later after being lulled to sleep by the rocking of the bus, we had arrived at a pull-off perched above your slope-side village and oak forests. Now, having descended slightly below the omnipresent cloud layer, the weather was beautiful. Immediately I was hit with an odd sense of familiarity amid all the seemingly new and strange tropical plants and animals I'd seen. The rolling oak forests standing before me looked oddly like the peaks of the Green Mountains of my hometown in Vermont.

After stepping from the bus, we unloaded all our bags into the back of a 1969 Ford painted brightly in the colors of the Costa Rican flag for transport down the mountainside. This was because the road was deemed "too rough" for other vehicles to pass through; a statement which made me respect the old truck for all the years it had been steadily climbing and descending your slopes. While heaving my duffle up into the covered truck bed, I became acquainted with the first of your few kind citizens, Carlos, whom would help me develop a connection to your special pastures, fields, ponds, and forest. He smiled with so much enthusiasm that it captured my attention. He shook my hand firmly as he exclaimed ¡Bienvenido a Cuerici!

Walking down towards Cuerici Research Station (the phrase "Research Station" often seems a misnomer in my imagination given how the space really feels like a home) I will never forget how you welcomed me into your alpine abode. As we hiked down from the alpine pass on the twisty dirt road, your citizens began to greet us.

Passing by a bush full of reddish flowers that looked like bleeding hearts cracked open to reveal a golden tongue, a foraging flock of yellow -crowned warblers flitted their buttery-colored wings in salute. Rounding a bend, we came to one of your vibrantly-green pastures strewn with white brahman cattle grazing contently. Their goat-like ears and soft brown eyes gave them the kindest appearance. Beyond

the cattle in the pastures came the occasional chorus of dogs. These braying hounds reminded me of the farmers' dogs that bark along the back road leading to our home in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. Unlike the neighborhood dogs back in the U.S. however, the dogs of Cuerici always seemed to travel in dynamic groups that were constantly moving, merging, and splitting from one another. Bands of semi-feral dogs would come to visit us and then disappear again during Cuerici morning coffee, providing our first obvious example of how truly dynamic the place was.

As the beautiful trek to the station lulled me into your trance, I found myself contextualizing your mountainous views, oak forests, lush pastures and tiny farm houses with an idyllic pastoralist gaze. I could imagine many generations of content cattle had grazed in the very fields I was observing, and that the birds had always had the forests to play in. I thought to myself "this would be such a nice place to retreat to and hide away from the craziness of the world for a while!"

Despite being initially enthralled by your apparent "time capsule" atmosphere, I've since come to realize that one of the reasons I love you so much is because you are constantly changing, constantly reshaping yourself. The communities gracing your slopes have experienced changes just as rapid and trying as anyone in New York City or Beijing China. Although I would often pause on your forest paths to stand in awe of the giant 160-foot tall royal oaks standing like sentinels over your thick forests, I had to remind myself that these lands were largely deforested 80 years prior to my arrival. The hard wood and immense diameter of these royal oaks gave the impression that they had stood for centuries, quietly watching the quetzals perching amongst their branches. The fact that you've created such a convincing illusion of complacency and continuity speaks to the beauty I found in your mystery. The longer I stayed with you Cuerici, the more I learned about your inner workings, and the often-abrupt changes that take place amid your backdrop of beautiful scenery, harmonic birdsong, and the day to day rhythm of the close-knit cattle and berry-farming communities that grace your slopes.

Take for instance the large tropical storm that swept over your slopes three months prior to my arrival. As the sons and daughters of your land informed me, this was a trying time for the community. Mother Nature came in a single powerful surge, like the crest of a wave breaking over a storm barrier- in

this case, over the ridge of the mountain. She lay her full force down on the village and rocked the royal oak forests. Before She left you, She took the lives of many of the tallest oaks who had thought they could stretch, unstoppable, above the surrounding forest. Before She left, She also caused your creeks and streams to swell tremendously, taking with them in their flushing torrents a large part of the single steep road. In a single night, your residents were truly trapped from the outside world, unable even to travel from the mountains for several weeks. Families had to pool resources together to make sure food supplies were adequate. Your citizens were no longer sitting in “content isolation” as I’d imagined they had. They were trapped.

By hearing such stories over the course of my stay, I developed a greater appreciation for the dynamic nature of your landscapes, and thus began to question a similar narrative occurring back home in Vermont. In my hometown, amid the cow pastures and rolling mountains of the Northeast Kingdom, I would often have friends ask me, “So... its beautiful and all, but what really happens around here? What do people do aside from farm and hike?” To me, these statements always seemed like an unfair simplification of a place I’d grown to love for the dynamic nature of its landscapes and people. Yes, we have beautiful hiking trails, lakes, and mountains, but the community has faced many hardships. Take for instance, the agricultural pollution of Lake Memphremagog, or high rates of unemployment among local dairy farmers that are losing business at the hand of large commercial farms in the Midwest. I couldn’t understand why it was so challenging for weekend visitors to miss this when I’d describe moments of change to them. How could they so easily be blinded to the fact that this isn’t a static nor idyllic landscape given that we’d just discussed the brutal cold snaps of the dead of winter as we sat by the warm waters of the lake in the summertime?

Now, Cuerici, I was in the position of an “outsider” amid your strikingly similar idyllic, rural world. However, I was also afforded enough time to look past the veil that often obscures foreign gazes upon such landscapes. By staying for an extended period of time amid your pastures and forests and talking with your residents while working on a study of local blackberry production, I came to the

realization that it is exceptionally easy to fall into creating such false narratives of unchanged, idyllic landscapes.

Hearing about the storms, the history of widespread deforestation, the pulse of rural development, and the passing of generations amid your communities allowed me to draw many parallels with my own rural hometown in Derby Vermont. Derby is where I grew up raising chickens and running trails in the forests of birch and sugar maples down by the shores of Lake Memphremagog. Until visiting your lush slopes I had never paused to take on the gaze of how an outsider might view my hometown; it too looks like idyllic countryside, albeit in a different sense, as if it had stood largely unchanged for the better part of a century. The red high-lofted barns, fields with black and white dappled Holsteins, and covered bridges speak of a bygone era. Yet to me, what I love most about Derby are all the dynamic attributes that don't reveal themselves immediately to the brief visitor. You have to "work" to pick up on these dynamics, but they are there all the same.

Take for instance, the two covered bridges that had to be reconstructed after their forefathers were destroyed- picked up and tossed like a cup of toothpicks- amid the floods of Tropical Storm Irene, or the fact that the farmland remaining in my hometown is only a fraction of the acreage it used to be. Even the forests by which the "Green Mountain State" received its name have not always covered much of the state as they do today. In the late 1800s, nearly 80% of Vermont was cleared to make way for wool production. Today, no wool is commercially produced in Vermont. Even the large maple trees that tourists come to see lining our back roads in all their fiery red, orange, and gold fall foliage often crack and tumble at the onset of violent summer thunderstorms. Just like your royal oaks, these giants stand regally, yet they don't always stand the testament of time. To the outsider- the fall tourists coming to peek at Vermont foliage or the Dartmouth biology student coming to stay at Cuerici- these narratives seem unacceptable and at odds with the idyllic, unchanged landscapes we've come to escape in. When I visited you Cuerici, I confronted this dynamic head on, and I walked away with a new appreciation. I realized that the dynamic nature of these environments, whether it be destructive storms uprooting old sugar maples or royal oaks and destroying infrastructure or simply the changing of the seasons, add beauty to the landscape.

Although the immediate aftermath of the tropical storm in Cuerici and Tropical Storm Irene in Vermont seemed ugly and destructive, I was able to see how citizens of both places came together, supported one another, and reestablished community in a beautiful way. The same beauty occurs when the mighty oak and maple fall, a new gap is created in these forests where a new tree can start its life.

Thinking back to when I visited you, I admit I was extremely lucky to have stayed in the company of one of the most insatiably curious and experienced children of your land, Carlos. Carlos' wisdom and kindness shone wherever he hiked with us in the woods, and his sense of connection to Cuerici was palpable whenever he entered the room. Upon our first meeting, I couldn't help but get a sense that he was not unlike the older dairy farmers from my hometown, intent on cultivating the land and more than happy to chat about both his and his own father's fond memories of the land. Despite his benevolent smile and the kind manner with which he would wave at the biology students and I after a day's fieldwork in the forest or his berry fields, I was initially afraid to speak with him. You see, I was not very confident in my foreign language skills prior to arriving. I was the type of person who would love to sing full Broadway tunes in the shower but was perfectly content to 'hide' myself as one of the backup singers in choir. I enjoyed improvisation on my trumpet, and yet I consistently declined the opportunity to perform a solo at the regional music festival each year throughout high school. Even when I would train for 5k running races, I couldn't bring myself to run with friends until I felt adequately in shape. I suppose I held an innate fear of allowing people to witness me 'struggling'... it wasn't apparent to me then how much this fear had impacted every facet of my life. Ultimately, it was when I was pushed out of my comfort zone to speak in a foreign language- with Carlos and other Cuerici residents- that I came to recognize this fear and looked back upon all the things it had prevented me from experiencing. Among the fond memories that I created while exploring your forests and farmlands, talking with Carlos and his family was a breakthrough moment that I will never soon forget.

My relationship with Carlos and his family began during a hot afternoon after working along the edge of one of Carlos' blackberry fields. The air didn't feel particularly warm given the 10,000 feet of

elevation, yet the sun's radiation beat down unrelentingly, leaving a dark sunburn on anyone unfortunate enough to wander about during the day's fieldwork without a sunhat and a thick layer of sunscreen. With so much less atmosphere to pass through, the UV radiation made its full presence known.

Throughout the middle of the day, I worked with four fellow students on our ecology project, which was designed to determine how forest fragments along the edges of Carlos' berry fields might be affecting blackberry productivity by providing habitat for beneficial insect-foraging birds as well as berry pollinators. I had begun pondering whether I should speak with Carlos about the project as I sat amongst the berry bushes, looking out over a fluffy layer of clouds blanketing the flat lands to the south, lapping against the bottom of the Talamanca Mountains like water meeting the banks of a pond. Suddenly, a herd of jittery cattle came trotting up the path, followed by Carlos' brother. "Hola, soy Manuel" he said. "Soy el hermano de Carlos. ¿Estás con el grupo escolar?" Manuel's smile was so kind, and the young cows he had been herding all circled back behind him to stare at me with their big brown eyes. It was as if they were staring through me, saying "you know *some* Spanish! Talk to the guy!" I could feel a flood of nervousness surge through my body, but ultimately, I had to go for it. With nobody to turn to out in the center of the field and fearing the feeling of disappointment I'd have with myself if I lied and pretended I didn't understand to avoid the situation, I replied: "Si, me llamo Alexander. Soy uno de los estudiantes universitarios de los Estados Unidos. Mucho gusto Manuel."

After a few minutes of conversing in my elementary Spanish, Manuel continued down the grassy path with a tip of his hat and the clinking of the cows' bells, but prior to leaving he'd given me a hearty pat on the back and told me that I should speak with his brother too. I felt like I had just run a marathon, such was my sense of accomplishment. "What did he say?" one of my teammates asked me. I'd never thought I'd be put in the position of being a translator before!

That evening as the kettle of thick hot cocoa was placed onto the table, I made my way over to where Carlos sat by the stove. He always came and sat quietly, his calloused hands laid one on top of the other over the smooth curve of his wooden cane, to see if his guests enjoyed dinner. There was something about his mannerisms that made me think of my grandfather at Christmas celebrations, who'd always sit

at the countertop in the kitchen, looking out at the rest of the party enjoying the meal he'd prepared. I could tell he held an immense wealth of knowledge, and now that I'd had a taste of trying out my Spanish I wanted to break through the language barrier again... I couldn't stand just seeing him sit quietly by the stove each night, not knowing his story.

"Hola, me gustaría presentarme... Me llamo Alexander. ¿Me preguntaba si podría contarme la historia de este lugar?" I asked him. Carlos' eyes had relaxed and the wrinkles on his cheeks folded as he smiled slightly. And so began an evening of storytelling. As the evening shadows lengthened around us, and the temperature dropped to a chilly 50 degrees, I gathered round the cast iron woodstove with Carlos and his daughter, as he told your stories Cuerici. Carlos told us about how his grandfather had first settled on the land when only one other house was erected in the area. It did not take long however for other mountain residents to move in too, and the forests now encircling the clearing with Carlos' trout ponds and berry fields had all been cut, leveled at the hand of farmers to make room for cattle. With the passage of the farm to his own father, it became clear that the local weather was not conducive for farmers being solely reliant on cattle production. In addition to economic incentives, his father hoped to see some of the beautiful oak and bamboo forests return to their former glory. And so, with the help of a young 10-year old Carlos, the family relinquished some of their control back to your hands, and the mossy montane forest returned. Carlos paused the story after the passage of his own father, visibly upset for a moment. I came to understand that these emotions were not just because he was re-experiencing the grief of the family loss, but because at this stage in his life he had almost lost his connection with you too Cuerici.

With only a few remaining cattle and a forest he wasn't permitted to log (the Costa Rican government forbade it), Carlos faced the ultimate decision. Would he stay on the land that had helped shape him into the man he was becoming, the place where his own children were beginning to love and beginning to learn from the forested landscape? The place where he used to hike and adventure to go birdwatching with his father?

The thought of being detached from his homeland was unbearable, so he decided to diversify his business model. Thus, the idea for Cuerici Biological Station blossomed, and along with it the series of

terraced trout ponds and blackberry fields were established. At this point in the story, I was intrigued to learn that the only place he had travelled to outside of Costa Rica was not far from my hometown in northern Vermont! He had travelled to a state trout hatchery to learn about the process of rearing fish, and along the way he also learned about blackberry cultivation. What a surreal experience it was, to be sitting around a crackling fire in the mountains of Costa Rica, speaking with an elderly man in Spanish about something so close to my own life experience. Carlos chuckled when I told him about trout fishing in the mountain streams with my grandfather and that my own parents have an out of control blackberry patch.

I am so glad Cuerici that the keepers of your human history speak a different language, as it forced me to continuously encounter my fear of struggling in front of others in order to continue learning your secrets. All the evening conversations with Carlos, as well as impromptu meetings out in the berry fields, led me to appreciate the value of going out of my comfort zone, as these experiences allowed me to experience the world in a new way.

I must also thank you Cuerici for prompting me to reexamine my relationship with my grandfather through speaking with Carlos and observing him work in the nearby forests and fields. Carlos reminded me of my grandfather, the man who originally prompted me to experience the outdoors when I was a young boy in the mountains, lakes, and streams surrounding my hometown in Vermont. On one particular afternoon, Carlos informed me that he and his daughter would be catching some trout from one of his long, narrow ponds to provide a fresh meal for the group. He gladly said I could join, and so I trotted out across the lush lawn toward the ponds. Before I proceed with this story however, I must pause Cuerici, and inform you about how central Carlos' trout ponds were to the time I spent getting to know you and feeling connected to you. Whenever I began feeling stressed about writing my research paper or couldn't identify one of the many black wasps I'd collected from the berry fields, I would silently walk to the terraced ponds, each about four feet deep and 30 feet in length. I would sit along the banks and look out across the pools separated by tiny waterfalls cascading from one level to the other, producing a trickling sound that nearly lulled me to sleep. I'd then look down into the water and watch the

streamlined, shimmering bodies of the trout schooling just below the surface. The atmosphere surrounding this system of trout ponds is difficult to describe, but if I had to compare it to anything, it would be the Hobbit village from the Lord of the Rings series. The entire scene was complete with flowering trees and large moss-covered oaks looming around four quaint wooden houses. It was thus of no surprise that it was during one of these magical visits to your trout, Cuerici, that I was prompted to begin pondering my relationship with my own grandfather.

On this particular day, Carlos and his daughter had me dipping nets into the pond in order to catch the largest fish. The water was not as cold as the streams in Vermont and the method of capture was vastly different, and yet there was something oddly familiar about the whole process. After a few minutes of dipping, sorting, and tossing unwanted fish back into the ponds, Carlos selected four of the largest trout from our nets and knelt down beside them. “Estos deben ser buenos. Ahora, asegúrate de matarlos rápidamente.” I knelt down alongside Carlos’ daughter and she showed me the fastest way to kill the fish; a quick backwards jerk of the head and the bodies fell limp. This was the part I had always felt uneasy about when fishing with my grandfather. As a small pool of dark red blood trickled onto the cool grass, I found myself doing something I had previously giggled at my grandfather for when I was younger.... I thanked you, Cuerici, for the fish, and for the delicious food that would come from their sacrifice. As I handed the fish off to Carlos, he smiled at me in the same way my grandfather had as a young boy, and he laid a similarly strong hand on my shoulder. It was as if Grandpa were there with me, looking at me again with those proud eyes. This time he would be proud that I had internalized one of his hunting and fishing practices. Thanking the forests and streams was important to him.

When I was younger, I began to develop a fascination with the outside world through trout fishing with my Grandpa. I remember clearly the first time he and I walked down into a ravine on Jay Peak, as he showed me how to cast out into the cold pools where the trout were waiting. “See, you should always aim for the edge of the bubbles. Trout like oxygenated waters, and they also like shelter. See that fallen log hanging out over the water? Cast near that.” After a splendid afternoon together in the crisp

forest air, I successfully reeled a small shimmering trout up onto the rocks. The fish swung around in the air as I excitedly jumped up and down, but my grandfather managed to grab it with his strong hands and carefully slid it from the hook. “See, now you can get a good look up close” he whispered. I will never forget looking into the eye of the strong, slippery fish. Its body rippled with muscle. I couldn’t believe that these fish moved up and down the same rivers I swam in. At the time I had thought my grandfather was happy because we had caught a fish, but I realize now that his happiness was based more on my reaction. He was just happy to see an infectious smile on my face. He had completed his objective for the day, which was to introduce me to his own love for the outdoors and the rivers he cherished so much.

The more I learned about Carlos and his relationship with you Cuerici, the more I examined my relationship with my grandfather and the forests near my home. My favorite walks in Costa Rica occurred when I hiked to see your large royal oaks. These giants towered far above me, waving their long beardlike strands of moss down at the forest floor far below. Although they were so much larger than any living tree I had encountered before, their swaying branches reminded me of the ancient sugar maple tree I often walked to climbed back home. In fact, when I returned home from my time visiting you Cuerici, the first trip I made was to walk to my old maple tree and gaze up at its branches. Although the firm trunk and branches on one side still reach skyward, half of the ancient body has crumbled to the ground after what appeared to be a lightning strike. I was sad that I had not returned to climb the tree in a long time, and yet I was also grateful that my time spent away had reminded me of the personal significance of these local land features.

There were many things you showed me Cuerici that reminded me of home, although they were oddly different too. I recognize now how important it was for me to immerse myself in your mountainous abode; a place that retains many of the distinguishing features of the mountains where I grew up but is also different enough to draw my full attention to features of the landscape and people who inhabit it. By examining the alterity in your landscape, I was in turn able to reflect upon the features I cherish most at home and recognized for the first time how integral these features were to my own development. When I sat calmly in the afternoons to watch the yellow-rumped warblers foraging amongst your bamboo

thickets, I compared and contrasted their movements in my mind to those of the birds I used to watch flitting about white birch thickets back home. How interesting it was to think that these initial encounters with the natural world right beyond my doorstep instilled within me a desire to understand the natural world. It was this same interest in the natural workings of my backyard that ultimately led me to apply for this Costa Rican adventure in the first place.

Today as I write to you amid cool spring weather in the northeast, I want you to know that I've carried this realization with me back home. Since my time back in the U.S., I've reacquainted myself with many of the natural landmarks that left an impression on me when I was young. I also started birdwatching again on campus, and pursuing nature photography. These are all activities that shaped and inspired me when I was young, and I've realized that they also help me develop a sense of place. Many of the natural places I've revisited since my return home may not seem grandiose to others, such as the small muddy brook curving and meandering its way behind our house, but I now realize how important these places have been for shaping me into the person I've become. Just as Carlos was molded and inspired by the bamboo, oaks, and mountainous streams of Cuerici, I was molded and inspired by the fields and forests of the Northeast Kingdom.

Before I say goodbye for now, I also wish to thank you Cuerici, for allowing me to deconstruct the barriers I'd created to connecting with my grandfather as a middle schooler. Through the serendipitous interactions I had with Carlos and his family, as they showed me their trout ponds, their berry fields, and the full wealth of their knowledge surrounding the birds and trees of the oak forest, I came to realize how similar the sense of wonder I was gaining was to explorations I'd had alongside my grandfather as a young boy. I was so thankful to Carlos for sharing his stories of struggle and his enthusiasm for the world around me, and I thanked him profusely. When I departed you Cuerici, I recognized that I had not managed to extend the same level of thanks to my own grandfather, who had served much the same role as Carlos now was during the young years of my life. My grandfather had been so instrumental for developing my current appreciation for the natural world. I recognize now that

this should have been obvious all along, and yet I had imposed barriers long ago that prevented me from seeing and respecting this.

My grandfather is a member of the Abenaki Nation. He serves on a tribal council for the Coosuk Band of this Native American tribe and loves to relearn the practices of my ancestors who first inhabited the northeastern forests thousands of years ago. He has dark hair, much darker than mine, and wise dark brown eyes. My sisters and I would sometimes joke that we don't quite look related to my grandfather, so we must have been adopted. Perhaps this was the first sign of how I came to distance myself from him. When I was thirteen you see, my grandfather asked my sisters and I if we would like to partake in an Abenaki naming ceremony. The naming ceremony he explained, was an important part of Abenaki culture and would confer a level of connection to our ancestors. My grandfather explained that he had been given his Abenaki name, Two Bears, several years ago, and that the entire experience had meant a lot to him. My sisters and I, instead of feeling excited or honored upon this suggestion, laughed uncomfortably. I had told myself that this was not something that belonged to me... I look white. I have blue eyes. I'm only a fraction Native American. Why would my grandfather ask me to do this? I began to feel annoyed with the situation and declined the offer a few days later. My refusal signaled the beginning of the end of our close relationship that characterized my early childhood up at deer camp. Although we still talked and enjoyed one another's company during the holiday season, I only returned to the woods to fish for trout or to go duck hunting with him a few more times. I just felt distanced from him, and I couldn't quite place why.

Now Cuerici, as I look back on this period of my life, I recognize where I went wrong. I now realize that the moments I spent alongside my father, cleaning the trout and thanking the river, or plucking the green-shimmering feathers of the ducks after an evening on the marsh and thanking the sky, where not so foreign after all. Although I may not have "looked" or "felt" Native American or connected with the traditions of my ancestors in the same way as my grandfather, he was showing me that I could develop a relationship with the land in my own way. Today, as I walk around the forests of northern Vermont, and I come to a stream with trout or an old maple tree, I think back to you Cuerici. I think back

to your sons and daughters, particularly to Carlos, who made me realize how a love for the land can persist across generations and serve to connect the living with their long-gone relatives. Overall, I thank you for giving me the chance to feel connected again to the land where I grew up, and to realize how important the seemingly simple moments spent alongside my grandfather in the great outdoors were to shape me into the man that I hope to become.

Although I cannot undo the way I reacted in the past, I hope to change for the better by carrying the practices Grandpa taught me in everyday life. I will make sure to thank the river and the sky when I fish or hunt and I will continue to recognize my connectedness with the lands around me, for this is what Grandpa taught me. You'll also be proud to hear that I've carried the sense of confidence you forced upon me back into the U.S. I am currently living in La Casa, trying to speak Spanish on a daily basis. Although I frequently make mistakes, I think back to Carlos' kind chuckle, a man who was simply happy to see that I was trying.

I hope all is well with you, and the sturdy oak forests, and the warblers, and the berry bushes, and the trout swimming in their cool ponds. I hope that the sons and daughters of your land continue kindling their unique relationship with your features, and that their own children absorb a similar mentality. I hope travelers like myself will continue visiting you Cuerici, and that they too will walk away not only with a suite of memorable moments to share, but a new outlook on their relationships with others and the natural world around them wherever they call home. I hope that future travelers will step out of their comfort zones to connect with Carlos, and that they are inspired by his stories to look at rural communities facing forms of rapid change (i.e.- development) in a new light; not as "soiled" or "un-idyllic" landscapes, but beautiful in the ways they adapt to and are molded by forces of change.

Sincerely,

Alexander C.